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The Anti-*Consolatio:* Boethius and *The Last Unicorn*

ALEXANDRA HENNESSEY OLSEN

Although Peter Beagle's *The Last Unicorn* has been called an allegory about the fact "that there is magic in being human" and about "the interdependence of such opposites as reality and illusion, eternity and time, life and death,"[1] modern critics have tended to ignore the philosophical underpinnings of the allegory. The general feeling, as Raymond M. Olderman has pointed out, is that "the delicacy of Beagle's book can be blotted by the critic's cold pen.... The unjustifiable impulse for a critic to say only that he is tuned in and appreciative is [strong] (p. 223). Fully to appreciate *The Last Unicorn,* however, the philosophical aspects cannot be ignored; for, as I hope to demonstrate, *The Last Unicorn* is best described as Beagle's answer to one of the most important philosophical works of the Western world, the allegorical *De Consolatione Philosophiae.*

Richard Green, who translated the *Consolatio*, has stated that it "was one of the most popular and influential books in Western Europe from the time it was written, in 524, until the end of the Renaissance,"[2] and modern scholars have demonstrated its influence on such post-Renaissance authors as Milton and Pope.[3] To argue that this early sixth-century work has also left its imprint on Beagle's 1960s novel may at first seem a little far-fetched, but an examination of the novel proves that a consideration of this possibility is not unwarranted.

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To begin with, one might point to the extensive use of classical and medieval materials which characterizes *The Last Unicorn.* Not only does the work depict a quest, like those found in medieval romances, and include paraphrases of Pliny, but Beagle's characters also evoke classical and medieval referents. The titular heroine, for example, is a unicorn whose human name is that of Zeus's nurse, "Amalthea"; "the harpy Celaeno"[4] is a captive of Mommy Fortuna; Prince Lír is named for the Irish sea-god; Elli, the persona adopted by Mommy Fortuna, is Old Age, whom the Norse God Thor once wrestled; and the beasts of the Midnight Carnival are a manticore, a dragon, a satyr, Cerberus, the Midgard Serpent, and the spider who was once "Arachne of Lydia" (p. 24).

What complicates *The Last Unicorn,* however, is the extent to which Beagle uses his classical and medieval material ironically. The band of outlaws in the greenwood, for example, is the antithesis of the band composed of Robin Hood and his Merry Men:

> We don't steal from the rich and give to the poor.... We steal from the poor because they can't fight back—most of them—and the rich take from us because they could wipe us out in a day. We don't rob the fat, greedy Mayor on the highway; we pay him tribute every month to leave us alone. We never carry off proud bishops and keep them prisoner in the wood, feasting and entertaining them, because Molly hasn't any good dishes, and besides, we just wouldn't be very stimulating company for a bishop. When we go to the fair in disguise, we never win at the archery or at singlestick. We do get some nice compliments on our disguises, but no more than that.... We have to sing those songs about wearing Lincoln green and aiding the oppressed. We don't, Cully, we turn them in for the reward, and those songs are just embarrassing, that's all, and there's the truth of it. (pp. 72-73)

Likewise, Beagle uses the fact that Prince Lír courts the Lady Amalthea with what Olderman calls "all the usual claptrap of romance heroes" (p. 233) to satirize the medieval romance ethos:

> I have swum four rivers, each in full flood and none less than a mile wide. I have climbed seven mountains never before climbed, slept three nights in the Marsh of the Hanged Men, and walked alive out of that forest where the flowers burn your eyes and the nightingales sing poison. I have ended my betrothal to the princess I had agreed to marry—and if you don't think that was a heroic deed, you don't know her mother. I have vanquished exactly fifteen black knights waiting by fifteen fords in their black pavilions, challenging all who come to cross. And I've long since lost count of the witches in the thorny woods, the giants, the demons disguised as damsels; the glass hills, fatal riddles, and terrible tasks; the magic apples, rings, lamps, potions, swords, cloaks, boots, neckties, and nightcaps. Not to mention the winged horses, the basilisks and sea serpents, and all the rest of the livestock. (pp. 149-50)

To recognize the Boethian character of *The Last Unicorn* requires a similar appreciation of irony. Beagle's way of making his own philosophical points frequently involves an inversion of traditional Boethian patterns and motifs.

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One unusual feature of *The Last Unicorn* is that the prose narrative is interrupted eighteen times by poems; the work even ends with a song about the value of minstrelsy:

> "But what if it prove that I am no harper?
> That I lied for your love most monstrously?"
> "Why, then I'll teach you to play and sing,
> For I dearly love a good harp," said she. (p. 248)

This form reminds the reader of that of the *Consolatio:* the *prosimetrum,* in which prose and verse passages alternate. H. R. Patch has warned that "the imitation of the form of the *Consolatio* in the mere alternation of prose and verse is not easy to identify," for some modern fantasies mingle prose and poetry in a non-Boethian fashion; the Boethian influence is most clearly present in works which have "a purpose and a spirit that harmonizes with that of [Boethius]."[5] It is not to be found in such fantasies as *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* in which the poetry is an integral part of the prose narratives and advances the stories. After dinner in Bilbo's hobbit-hole, for example, the dwarves sing a song that both describes the way in which the dragon Smaug invaded the Lonely Mountain and awakens Bilbo's Tookish interest in adventure: "As they sang the hobbit felt the love of beautiful things made by hands and by cunning and by magic moving through him, a fierce and a jealous love, the desire of the hearts of dwarves. Then something Tookish woke up inside him, and he wished to go and see the great mountains, and hear the pine-trees and the water-falls, and explore the caves, and wear a sword instead of a walking-stick."[6] In *The Return of the King,* Sam Gamgee searches for Frodo in the Tower of Cirith Ungol, and when he cannot find him, he sings a song to hearten himself; the song enables him to find Frodo when he hears "a faint voice answering him."[7] In contrast to Tolkien but like Boethius, Beagle uses the poems not to advance the narrative but to interrupt it, commenting on past events or foreshadowing future ones; in other words, the poems are related to the themes of and philosophical points made by the story rather than to the story itself. Although the purpose and spirit of *The Last Unicorn* do not precisely harmonize with those of the *Consolatio,* they do resemble them in an inverted manner.

In the *Consolatio,* the poems serve two major purposes: they "give the reader's mind a pleasant and welcome rest from the strain of following the argument developed in the prose passages, and...[they have an] important part to play in clarifying or carrying forward the argument."[8] Beagle's poetic passages provide the reader with a rest from following the philosophical argument developed in the prose narrative, but it is neither "pleasant" nor "welcome," for the passages disquiet the reader. The ballads commemorating

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Captain Cully, for example, seem to describe in an amusing fashion the anti-heroic reality which Cully represents: swords whistle "like the tea" (p. 70), and a man can be asked whether he is sad because he has lost his lady or because he is "scabbit in...[his] greep" (p. 69). In addition, they call into question the value of the heroic ideal which Prince Lír accepts even though he knows that to be a hero "is a trade, no more, like weaving or brewing" (p. 212). Many of the poems are disquieting because they are paradoxical or ambiguous. In the fourteenth verse of one ballad, Cully responds to the warning that "there are fifty swords without the house, and fifty more within" (p. 80) with a reply which is humorous because Cully does not seem to understand that the swords are in the hands of men:

> "Ha' done, ha' done," says Captain Cully, "and never fear again,
> For they may be a hundred swords, but we are seven men." (p. 81)

The final effect of the passage is grim because of the ambiguity of the line, "and never fear again"; Cully means "do not be afraid," but the words suggest that if seven men attack one hundred they will "never fear again" because they will die. One might argue that the prose passages provide "a pleasant and welcome rest" from the disquieting poetry.

Like the poems of the *Consolatio,* those of *The Last Unicorn* are related to the philosophical argument of the work. By poetic passages such as the one quoted above, Beagle emphasizes the importance of the theme of the contrast between reality and illusion in *The Last Unicorn.*[9] One seemingly obtrusive poem, which has no importance at all in the narrative itself, also helps to underscore the importance of this theme. It occurs when a female blue jay is "sitting on the nest, singing to...[her] children in a dreary drone" (p. 52) about the bitter realities of a blue jay's life:

> Grasshoppers, snails, and a quail's egg or two—
> All to be regurgitated for you.
> Lullaby, lullaby, swindles and schemes,
> Flying's not near as much fun as it seems. (p. 53)

Many of the poems explore the theme of reality and illusion by making statements which are unintelligible at the time but which foreshadow future events. The first poem of the book is sung by the unicorn and is "a song she had heard a young girl singing in her forest long ago":

> Sparrows and cats will live in my shoe,
> Sooner than I will live with you.
> Fish will come walking out of the sea,
> Sooner than you will come back to me.

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The unicorn does not "understand the words" (p. 14), so the song is at this point an illusion. It becomes real only at the end of the book when we realize that fish will indeed walk before "the lost girl...the Lady Amalthea" can return and live "happily ever after with the prince" (p. 229). The stanzas of Elli's song, with the haunting refrain, "What is gone is gone," appear four times and remind us of mortality and the mutability of human life, an important theme in a book in which the immortal unicorn is trapped in the mortal body of a young girl, and in which Schmendrick, who was born mortal, is doomed to immortality until he becomes a true magician. The line prepares us for the sorrow of the re-transformed unicorn, who tells Schmendrick, "Some part of me is mortal yet. I am full of tears and hunger and the fear of death, though I cannot weep, and I want nothing, and I cannot die. I am not like the others now, for no unicorn was ever born who could regret, but I do. I regret" (p. 244).

Boethius considers poetry "one of the lower arts ancillary to the more serious pursuit of dialectic in the hierarchy of learning,"[10] and although he begins the *Consolatio* with a poem addressed to the "*lacerae... Camenae*"[11] [wounded Muses], he ends with prose. Beagle reverses the pattern, beginning *The Last Unicorn* with prose and ending with the song Schmendrick and Molly sing as they go "away together, out of this story and into another" (p. 248), thereby affirming that poetry is an important part of life. When Lady Philosophy enters Boethius' room, she drives away the Muses: *"Quae ubi poeticas Musas uidit nostro assistentes toro fletibusque meis uerba dictantes, commota paulisper ac torius inflammata luminibus.... Inquit... Sed abite potius, Sirenes usque in exitium dulces, meisque eum Musis curandum sanandumque relinquite"* (pp. 2-3). [When she saw the Muses of poetry sitting by my bed and speaking words to soothe my tears, for a little while she was upset and excited with burning eyes.... She said..."But depart quickly, you Sirens, whose sweetness leads to ruin, and leave him to be cured and healed by my Muses."] Metaphorically, by dismissing the Muses, Lady Philosophy changes Boethius from a poet to a philosopher. In contrast, Prince Lír struggles to become a poet; and Molly Grue acts as his personal Muse of Poetry. Even though Lír's efforts are humorous, Beagle implies that they are important because he describes them at length and because he links them with humanity and love:

> "Do you like the first poem?"
>
> "It certainly has a lot of feeling," she said. "Can you really rhyme 'bloomed' and 'ruined'?"
>
> "It needs a bit of smoothing out," Prince Lír admitted. "'Miracle''s the word I'm worried about."
>
> "I was wondering about 'grackle' myself."
>
> "No, the spelling. Is it one *r* and two *l*'s, or the other way round?" (p. 169)

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In one of the most complex portions of the *Consolatio,* Lady Philosophy says, *"Quodsi te musici carminis oblectamenta delectant, hanc oportet paulisper differas uoluptatem dum nexas sibi ordine contexo rationes"* (p. 79). [But although the pleasures of poetical songs delight you, you must for a little while put aside the pleasure while I construct the entwining philosophical arguments in their proper order.] In *The Last Unicorn,* poetry is more important than philosophy, for it is associated with love and humanity. Only one character in *The Last Unicorn* hates poetry: King Haggard, who is so inhuman that he knows neither "fear...[nor] rest" (p. 183) and is therefore served by the Red Bull, and who is incapable of loving. When Prince Lír first sings to the Lady Amalthea, Haggard complains, "What business had he to be singing?...He was singing here, and not of battle and gallantry either, but of love. Where is she? I knew he was singing of love before I ever heard him, for the very stones shuddered as they do when the Bull moves in the earth" (p. 178). Haggard is the only philosophical character in the book, and he sometimes echoes sentiments expressed by Lady Philosophy. She says that no one should love the gifts of Fortune because *"constat aeterna positumque lege est, ut constet gentium nihil"* (p. 23), [one thing is certain and fixed by eternal law, that nothing that is born remains constant], and Boethius intends her pronouncement to be authoritative. Beagle questions the validity of such an attitude by putting similar words into Haggard's mouth: "I always knew that nothing was worth the investment of my heart, because nothing lasts, and I was right, and so I was always old" (p. 187). In *The Last Unicorn,* a philosophical outlook causes a person "to lose...[his] heart's desire in the having of it" (p. 242), but making or reciting poetry makes him human and happy.

One of the ways in which Boethius most influenced later literary works was by his depiction of the goddess Fortune; Patch claims that "it is hardly an exaggeration to say that in the *Consolatio* all the details of the conventional portrait of Fortune in medieval literature found a beginning. One cannot hope to stop her wheel; if the goddess cease to be fickle, she ceases to be Fortune; she puts one up, another down" (p. 96). Norford has pointed out that "Mommy Fortuna, as her name suggests, seems to be the presiding deity of the network of illusion that makes up this world. Like the medieval Goddess Fortuna, she is associated with the irrational whirls of the wheel of fortune, which raises up and throws down indiscriminately: 'Here is there, and high is low;/All may be undone./What is true, no two men know—/ What is gone is gone'" (p. 95). Beagle's conception of Fortune is Boethian; he even uses the latin form of Fortune's name used by Boethius and medieval authors.

In contrast to Boethius' Fortune, however, Beagle's is not a powerful and capricious deity but an inefficient witch "trudging through eternity, hauling... [her] homemade horrors" (p. 32). Boethius says that Fortune practices *"multiformes...fucos"* [manifold deceits] on these whom she *"eludere nititur"* (p. 17) [intends to cheat]. Mommy Fortuna is a "tired old trickster" who

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casts "spells of seeming...[but] cannot make things" because "her shabby skill lies in disguise" (pp. 22, 23). According to Boethius, those who trust Fortune and believe in her promises put themselves "*Fortunae... regendum*" (p. 18) [under the rule of Fortune]. Likewise, Mommy Fortuna's power is dependent on trust—on, for example, "the eagerness of those gulls, those marks, to believe whatever comes easiest. She can't turn cream into butter, but she can give a lion the semblance of a manticore to eyes that want to see a manticore there—eyes that would take a real manticore for a lion, a dragon for a lizard, and the Midgard Serpent for an earthquake. And a unicorn for a white mare" (p. 23).

Although the "gulls" who visit the Midnight Carnival are the slaves of Fortune, the most extreme example of someone *"Fortunae regendum"* is the spider Arachne. The magic surrounding her "isn't like the others... [because] the spider believes. She sees those cat's-cradles herself and thinks them her own work. Belief makes all the difference to magic like Mommy Fortuna's" (p. 25). When Fortune ceases to favor him, Boethius is thrown *"in maestitiam luctumque"* (p. 18) [into melancholy and mourning]. Arachne cannot accept the fact that Fortune's wheel has turned and left her—as Boethius says it inevitably must—"*intolerabili dolore*" (p. 17) [with intolerable sorrow]— but wishes to remain at the top of the wheel as the mythical weaver. Even when offered her freedom, she remains "busy with a web which looked to her as though the Milky Way had begun to fall like snow" (pp. 43-44). Like Boethius, she grieves for her lost splendor, and the last sound that Schmendrick and the Unicorn hear as they flea from the Midnight Carnival is "the tiny, dry sound of a spider weeping" (p. 47).

Mommy Fortuna is killed in the third chapter of *The Last Unicorn,* but Boethian images of Fortune recur throughout the book. Norford points out that as the unicorns "drift in and out on the tides for his [Haggard's] enjoyment...the ebb and flow of the tides resembles the whirling wheel of fortune" (p. 99). The image of the wheel of Fortune recurs in the curse placed on Hagsgate by the nameless witch who built King Haggard's castle. It is not inconceivable that the witch was Mommy Fortuna herself, who will "never go" to Hagsgate, although she knows about the city and once says "that even Haggard...[is] not safe while Hagsgate [stands]" (p. 93). The witch's curse links the fate of the people of Hagsgate to that of Haggard as he rises and falls with the revolution of Fortune's wheel, for they will "share his feast and share his fall." The people of Hagsgate are originally at the lowest point on the wheel; Drinn reminds the older men of the city that "Hagsgate was then as this land has become: a scrabbly, bare place where men put great stones on the roofs of their huts to keep them from blowing away.... Strangers thought the town accursed" (p. 101).

Along with Haggard, Hagsgate prospers and reaches the apex of Fortune's wheel:

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From that moment, we have known nothing but bounty. Our grim earth has grown so kind that gardens and orchards spring up by themselves—we need neither to plant nor to tend them. Our flocks multiply; our craftsmen become more clever in their sleep; the air we breathe and the water we drink keep us from ever knowing illness. All sorrow parts to go around us—and this has come about while the rest of the realm, once so green, has shriveled to cinders under Haggard's hand. For fifty years, none but he and we have prospered. (pp. 101-02)

When Haggard falls—literally as well as figuratively, for he falls "down through the wreckage of his disenchanted castle" (p. 227)—so does Hagsgate, and it is "as though fifty years' worth of foiled griefs had struck Hagsgate all at once" (p. 236). Philosophy warns Boethius that Fortune's wheel cannot stop turning: *"Tu uero uoluentis rotae impetum retinere conaris? At, omnium mortalium stolidissime, si manere incipit fors esse desistit"* (pp. 18-19). [Are you truly trying to stop the rapid motion of her turning wheel? But, most foolish of all mortals, if perchance it should stop, it would cease to exist.] The people of Hagsgate are foolish enough to try to stop the wheel at the top of its revolution; as Drinn says, "Our real task is to keep Haggard's tower from falling, and since the hero who will destroy it can only come from Hagsgate, this should not be impossible. For one thing, we allow no strangers to settle here.... We have no children. We have had none since the day that the curse was laid upon us" (pp. 103-04). However, after their fall, the people of Hagsgate do not complain that Fortune has betrayed them because they have always really known that they would share Haggard's fall and have "always had the air of paupers, even in the midst of plenty, and real ruin made them appear almost relieved, and no whit poorer" (pp. 236-37). They seem to be heeding Fortune's warning: *"Rotam uolubili orbe uersamus, infima summis, summa infimis mutare gaudemus. Ascende si placet, sed ea lege, ne uti cum ludicri mei ratio poscet descendere iniuriam putes"* (p. 20). [I keep turning my wheel in a spinning rotation; I enjoy changing the lowest to the highest and the highest to the lowest. Climb up if it please you, but on this condition, that you do not think yourself wronged when the way of my sport requires you to descend.]

Fortune enslaves those who trust her, and Philosophy tells Boethius, *"Dominae moribus oportet obtemperes"* (p. 18). [You ought to comply with the practices of your mistress.] Mommy Fortuna keeps the animals in cages and expects her human servants, Rukh and Schmendrick, to obey her completely. Haggard, whom Norford describes as "the male counterpart of Mommy Fortuna" (p. 95), substitutes for Fortune in the second half of the book, for in keeping with his other reversals of Boethian patterns, Beagle depicts one version of Fortune as male. The people of Hagsgate are those "whom Haggard holds in thrall" (p. 101). They comply with all his practices, and even when they see "the Red Bull hunting" the unicorns, they pretend "not to see" (p. 237). Like Fortune, Haggard is capricious and cruel, as may be exemplified by a comment of his to Schmendrick: "You

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are losing my interest...and that is very dangerous. In a moment I will have forgotten you quite entirely, and will never be able to remember just what I did with you. What I forget not only ceases to exist, but never really existed in the first place" (p. 137).

Although both Boethius and Beagle discuss the theme of fortune, their use thereof is different. In Boethius, the love of transitory things—riches, honor, and even family members—puts one in the power of Fortune, and one will inevitably be betrayed by her. In contrast, in Beagle it is the love of the immutable which betrays people and makes them prisoners of Fortune. The spider wishes to be the legendary weaver Arachne, and the people who patronize the Midnight Carnival can be tricked because they wish to see "creatures of night, brought to light" and "legends" rather than real animals (pp. 19, 20). Their desire for the immutable world which no human being can possess is shown by "the sorrow and loss and sweetness in their faces" as they look at the unicorn, which causes her to wonder "what it must be like to grow old, and to cry" (p. 27). The people of Hagsgate are the willing slaves of Fortune because she has given them prosperity, and they do not want the situation to change although they know that it must and will. Because he believes that nothing is "worth the investment of...[his] heart, because nothing lasts" (p. 187), Haggard is unable to take any pleasure in life. He tells the Lady Amalthea that he adopted Prince Lír by picking him up "where someone else had set him down, thinking that I had never been happy and never had a son. It was pleasant enough at first, but it died quickly. All things die when I pick them up" (p. 183). He even "hates good food. He says that no meal is good enough to justify all the money and effort wasted in preparing it" (p. 160).

All these people are both despicable and pathetic, because in their search for the immutable they have lost their pleasure in transitory, human joys. At the end of the book, Schmendrick warns the people of ruined Hagsgate, "Hagsgate will yield a living exactly as miserly as the hearts that dwell there. You may plant your acres again, and raise up your fallen orchards and vineyards, but they will never flourish as they used to, never—until you learn to take joy in them, for no reason" (p. 239). Only those who are "truly human...[who] can love, and fear, and forbid things to be what they are, and overact" (p. 211) can take pleasure in things "for no reason" and escape Fortune's traps. The unicorn is a tragic figure because she is inhuman and immortal, "a story with no ending, happy or sad. She can never belong to anything mortal enough to want her" (p. 233). Yet even she can enjoy the transitory things of the world, and so is better than Haggard: "It was always spring in her forest, because she lived there, and she wandered all day among the great beech trees, keeping watch over the animals that lived in the ground and under bushes, in nests and caves, earths and treetops. Generation after generation, wolves and rabbits alike, they hunted and loved and had children and died, and as the unicorn did none of these things, she never grew tired of watching them" (p. 2).

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Beagle depicts an immortal female figure who stands in relationship to the human characters as Philosophy does to Boethius: the unicorn herself. The unicorn changes form twice during the novel, and in addition, Mommy Fortuna lays a spell of "seeming" (p. 23) on her so that the visitors to the Midnight Carnival can see her as a unicorn. Lady Philosophy is also a shape-shifter: *"Nam nunc quidem ad communen sese hominum mensuram cohibebat, nunc uero pulsare caelum summi uerticis cacumine uidebatur"* (p. 2). [For sometimes she was confined to the common height of men, and sometimes truly the top of her head seemed to strike the sky.] Lady Philosophy is the original of such wise, immortal literary females as reason in the *Roman de la Rose,* Beatrice in Dante's *Commedia,* Chaucer's Lady Fame, and Langland's Holy Church.[12] Like Philosophy, these feminine figures instruct human beings, but in *The Last Unicorn,* the human beings are the teachers of the immortal. In the third book of the *Consolatio,* Philosphy discusses the way in which people are attracted *"ad falsa"* (p. 38) [to false things] which are transitory and betray them. Her opinion of the things which change is echoed by the unicorn, who when first transformed into a girl asks, "how can anything that is going to die be real? How can it be truly beautiful?" (p. 127). Lady Philosophy speaks what Boethius considers the truth, for the prisoner allows her to console him and help him turn from the love of transitory things to the love of God. Boethius finds his solution to the problems posed by mutability and death in his Christian faith, and he ends the *Consolatio* with an admonition to his reader to have faith in God:

Manet etiam spectator desuper cunctorum praescius deus uisionisque eius praesens semper aeternitas cum nostrorum actuum futura qualitate concurit bonis praemia malis supplicia dispensans. Nec frustra sunt in deo positae spes precesque, quae cum rectae sunt inefficaces esse non possunt. Auersamini igitur uitia, colite uirtutes, ad rectas spes animum subleuate, humiles preces in excelsa porrigite. Magna uobis est, si dissimulare non uultis, necessitas indicta probitatis cum ante oculos agitis indicis cuncta cernentis. (p. 105)

[God the prescient remains always the spectator of all things from above and the eternal present of his vision always concurs with the future nature of our actions, dispensing rewards to the good and punishments to the evil. Our hopes and prayers are not vainly directed to God, because those which are righteous cannot be ineffective. Therefore, shun vices, cultivate virtues, lift up your soul to noble hopes, and offer humble prayers to Heaven. If you do not wish to pretend that things are not the way they are, there is a great necessity for you to act with probity, since you do everything before the eyes of a Judge Who sees everything.]

In contrast to Boethius, Beagle suggests that the unicorn's belief that transitory things are neither real nor beautiful is wrong, for she comes to agree with Schmendrick's assertion that "whatever can die is beautiful—more beautiful than a unicorn, who lives forever, and who is the most beautiful creature in the world" (p. 128). The immortal unicorn cannot face

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the Red Bull because, as she says, "he was too strong...too strong. There was no end to his strength, and no beginning. He is older than I" (p. 124). Only after she has been human and learned to love can she defeat the Bull, for he kills Prince Lír, and the unicorn gives "an ugly, squawking wail of sorrow and loss and rage, such as no immortal creature ever gave" (p. 224) before attacking him. Even after becoming the immortal unicorn again, she remains affected by her mortal nature and tells Schmendrick, "I have been mortal, and some part of me is mortal yet. I am full of tears and hunger and the fear of death, though I cannot weep, and I want nothing, and I cannot die. I am not like the others now, for no unicorn was ever born who could regret, but I do. I regret.... My people are in the world again. No sorrow will live in me as long as that joy—save one, and I thank you for that, too" (p. 244). A person can be happy only when he accepts mortality and his limitations and does not long for an immutable world. For example, Schmendrick becomes a "true and mortal wizard" only when he accepts his humanity and experiences "wonder and love and great sorrow" such that his immortality falls "from him like armor, or like a shroud" (pp. 242, 218, 219).

The Last Unicorn shows the influence of the *Consolatio* in both form and content. It is a *prosimetrum* which is an anti-*Consolatio;* for despite the debt that its characters and themes owe to those of Boethius, Beagle's message is the opposite of that taught by Philosophy. One must accept one's human limitations—as Schmendrick does when he tells the unicorn, "Life is short, and how many can I help or harm" (p. 243)—and choose "one road to follow, out of the many that run to the same place in the end" (p. 246). At the same time, one must enjoy the small things of life and not become obsessed with the desire to possess an immutable world. According to Olderman, the message of *The Last Unicorn* is that "we live in a waste land because we *choose* to look at death, and have either forgotten how to see the world's wonder or, having seen it, grow haggard in trying to possess it, thereby losing our heart's desire in the having of it. And if that is not the moral, then this statement from the unicorn must be—something to keep in mind when faced with harpies or red bulls—'You must never run from anything immortal. It attracts their attention'" (p. 239). Boethius' God knows and sees everything, and no one can escape His judgment; Beagle's characters can escape the attention of immortal beings and lead happy, human lives. The late Classical writer suggests that we should hope to leave a world of change and sorrow for an immutable world, whereas the modern author—writing in an age of little faith about a world with no presiding deity—says that we should ignore the immutable and take pleasure in the fact that "everything dies...[and realize that] it is good that everything dies" (p. 210); for immortality is a curse, or a shroud.

NOTES

1/ Raymond M. Olderman, *Beyond the Waste Land: A Study of the American Novel in the Nineteen-Sixties* (New Haven, 1976), p. 223; Don Parry Norford, "Reality and Illusion in Peter Beagle's *The Last Unicorn,*" *Critique: Studies in Modern Fiction,* 19 (1977), 95.

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2/ Richard Green, trans., *The Consolation of Philosophy* (Indianapolis, 1962), p. ix.

3/ See John S. Coolidge, "Boethius and 'That Last Infirmity of Noble Mind'," *Philosophical Quarterly,* 42 (1973), 176-82, and D. W. Robertson, Jr., "Pope and Boethius," *Classical, Medieval, and Renaissance Studies in Honor of Berthold Louis Ullman,* vol. 2, ed. Charles Henderson, Jr., (Roma, 1964), pp. 503-13.

4/ Peter S. Beagle, *The Last Unicorn* (New York, 1970), p. 26. Further references to this work appear in the text.

5/ Howard Rollin Patch, *The Tradition of Boethius: A Study of His Importance in Medieval Culture* (New York, 1935), pp. 88, 121.

6/ J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Hobbit, or There and Back Again* (Boston, 1952), p. 25.

7/ Tolkien, *The Return of the King* (London, 1963), p. 185.

8/ Helen M. Barrett, *Boethius: Some Aspects of His Times and Work* (Cambridge, 1940), p. 77.

9/ For a discussion of the theme of reality and illusion and ancillary themes, see Norford.

10/ Green, p. xx.

11/ Boethius, *Anicii Manlii Severini Boethii Philosophiae Consolatio,* ed. Lvdovicvs Bieler (Tvrnholti, 1957), p. 1. Further references to this work appear in the text; all translations are my own.

12/ In *La Consolation de Philosophie dans la Tradition Littéraire: Antécédents et Postérité de Boèce* (Paris, 1967), pp. 26-66, Pierre Courcelle discusses *Alcuin et la tradition littéraire du IXe au XIIe siècle sur Philosophie* (p. 29). Green mentions briefly the influence of Boethius' Lady Philosophy on other female figures in the introduction to his translation of the *Consolatio,* pp. xxii-xxiii.

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